

Impeachment is Back on the Table

McClellan's Dish

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The most powerful leader in the world had called upon me to speak on his behalf and help restore credibility he lost amid the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. So I stood at the White House briefing room podium in front of the glare of the klieg lights for the better part of two weeks and publicly exonerated two of the senior-most aides in the White House: Karl Rove and Scooter Libby.

There was one problem. It was not true.

I had unknowingly passed along false information. And five of the highest ranking officials in the administration were involved in my doing so: Rove, Libby, the Vice President, the President's chief of staff, and the President himself.

-Excerpt from Scott McClellan's forthcoming book "What Happened" (Public Affairs Books, due out in April 2008)

With that one little statement, released on the Public Affairs Books website this week, all excuses for not impeaching President Bush and Vice President Cheney, not to mention indicting Cheney (who of course has no immunity from prosecution while in office), have evaporated.

Here is rock-solid evidence from a man who, as press secretary, was privy to the inner workings of the White House, of a vile conspiracy involving the two top men in the Bush/Cheney administration, as well as their top three staffpeople, to expose the identity of an important CIA undercover operative, Valerie Plame, and then, when caught, to obstruct a criminal investigation by Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald, into that crime.

Forget for a moment the administration's other high crimes and misdemeanors and acts of bribery and treason, though many, like defying laws passed by the Congress, or violating the Nuremburg Charter, are surely far more egregious. This particular set of crimes-conspiracy, obstruction of justice, lying, and of course the underlying crime of abuse of power and perhaps treason (since Plame's responsibility as a high-ranking CIA operative was preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, particularly in the Middle East!)-is serious enough.

There is no way that American democracy can continue to survive, even in its current truncated form, if the Congress continues to duck this issue and pretend that it has "more important things to do," as Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her retinue of "leaders" in the House have continued to claim for an entire year in control of the Congress.

To keep impeachment “off the table,” knowing that the president and vice president brazenly lied to the American people and to the Special Counsel’s office about such a serious offense, is to make a mockery of the Constitution and the law.

Bush and Cheney must be impeached at this point if only to save school districts across the nation the cost of having to buy all new American history and civics texts, revised so as to remove all discussion of the notion of Constitutional checks and balances and the word “impeachment.”

It is of course possible that the political reality is that Republicans in Congress have become such an antidemocratic conglomeration of authoritarian yes-men that they would defend their political leaders no matter what their crimes, and that thus impeachment would be a dead end, either in the House or certainly in the Senate. This, however, is no excuse for not calling the president and vice president to account in impeachment hearings in the House, where Democrats have a solid majority.

An impeachment hearing before the House Judiciary Committee, with full subpoena power granted to that committee, would lead to revelations and exposures far beyond that of Scott McClellan’s, though putting McClellan under oath on national TV in such a hearing promises to be as enlightening and entertaining as was the testimony in 1974 before the same panel by Nixon White House attorney John Dean.

The critical importance of such hearings to the future of American democracy, and to public understanding of the nature of the coup that has been undermining that democracy should be obvious. It wouldn’t matter what the vote was following such hearings. Certainly articles of impeachment would be voted out of the committee and sent to the floor of the House. Almost as certainly, the House would end up having to support those articles. So Bush and Cheney would at least stand impeached, probably with at least some Republican’s voting for impeachment. They would probably also be forced, like President Clinton before them, to stand trial in the Senate—if Republicans didn’t first succeed in convincing them to resign to spare their party a disaster at the polls next November.

Certainly it’s possible that proponents of conviction in the Senate would not be able to convince the 16 or 17 Republican necessary to win a conviction and removal from office, but it wouldn’t matter at that point. The Bush administration would stand condemned for all time as a gang of criminals and usurpers.

It’s worth noting that following Clinton’s impeachment and trial, which failed to remove him from office, the Oval Office has been off-limits to unchaperoned interns, and it is likely to be a long time before felatio is re-enacted under the Oval Office desk. Similar action against Bush and Cheney would make future Constitutional crimes equally unlikely for the same reason, even without conviction.

This would be even more true if Special Counsel Fitzgerald were to do his duty, as he clearly should, and reopen his Plame investigation with an indictment of Cheney, and with the naming of Bush, like Nixon before him, as an “unindicted co-conspirator.”

For starters, Pelosi must take this moment to declare that impeachment is “back on the table.”

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